DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 077 009 CS 200 521

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TITLE Writing with Fire.
PUB DATE Oct 72
NOTE 16p.; Forum paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Modern Language Assn. (14th, St. Louis, October 26-28, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *Composition Skills (Literary); Creative Teaching; Creative Writing; English; Language Styles; *Personal Interests; Personal Relationship; *Secondary Education; Student Teacher Relationship; *Writing Exercises

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that the personal theme is a solution to the problem of motivating high school students to write better. The author, a high school English teacher, found that his students wrote poorly because they were writing on topics of which they had no intimate knowledge and because the theme assignments pleased the teacher, not the students. In an effort to overcome these shortcomings, the author asked his students to write for twelve minutes of each day on any topic from their own experience. After collecting the themes, the teacher scanned each for thirty seconds, underlining a memorable word, phrase, or line, but not making any written comments. At the end of the week each student rewrote one of his themes and ditto mastered it. The teacher did not distribute themes whose content might embarrass the student (these were discussed in private conference), but many of the other themes were discussed in class. No names were attached nor grades assigned until the end of the quarter. The writer argues that this method, which concentrated on the student's personal experience, resulted in much more successful writing. (DI)

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WRITING WITH FIRE

John Bennett

"I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it" (William Faulkner: Sartoris).

When I taught writing five years ago, I never asked students to write what they saw and felt. I never asked a single young man or woman to tell the truth. If they had, I would have turned them into the office for disciplinary action. I received the usual collective groans when I assigned themes, but all English teachers get that, and an occasional unsigned crumpled piece of paper from some malcontent, " . . . this assignment is a pile . . . ," but I wasn't worried.

I felt justified in asking my students to write themes on "What It Feels Like To Be A Millionaire," "The Blacks And The Jews Are The Same," and "The Philosophy Of Original Sin As Applied To Huckleberry Finn and Lord Of The Flies and Publish Your Sources."

The fact that few of my students were rich, or black or Jewish or knew anything at all about Original Sin escaped me. Another stimulation topic was "Where Am I Going After I Die?" I considered myself to be almost unique in my assignments.

I had done my homework. My room was filled with paintings of Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Picasso, Titian, Goya. I had a record player going before, between classes, and after school playing Beethoven, Lightfoot, and Baez. I read Edgar

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Friedenberg's The Vanishing Adolescent three times and knew Paul Goodman's Growing Up Absurd almost by heart. I knew I wasn't blasting the self-esteems of my students, and I felt pretty good about myself.

Like every other English teacher at Central High, I had four stacks of themes to correct every weekend. "Write a theme a week, and they'll be ready for college," I had heard my department head say. Who was I to doubt the tradition?

Secretly, I suspected that my pile of themes was some sort of self-imposed guilt penalty I used to justify my job, but I never said that to anyone. At the end of school on Friday, I would pick them up from my desk and haul them home in yellow folders in a gray, battered briefcase. Each folder was marked with the class hour. And as soon as I walked in my house I put them on a card table in a little coat closet next to the front door. It was the coldest spot in the house. My wife called it "The Library." I then forgot the whole business and set about to enjoy the weekend with my family, as quickly as I could. But inexorably, the end of Sunday always came. I hoped it wouldn't, but it always did.

In the evening after turning up the heat, putting on a heavy sweater, making a fire in the fireplace, fixing the next day's lunch, kissing Sean and Julie good-night, reading the New York Times, The Kalamazoo Gazette, The New Republic, The Saturday Review, The Ladies' Home Journal, Vogue, Pageant, and Jet, I turned to my duty. The huge yellow stack would

be waiting.

I would carefully tighten my belt, sigh, swear an oath, pull back the old folding chair in front of the little squeaky table, push the overcoats out of my face, rummage through the cigar box for a red pen and open the first folder. My eyes would be greeted by this:

> Lord of the Flies is a fascinating work of art. It is one of the most interesting books that I have ever read. There are certain aspects that should be illuminated in comparing Huckleberry Finn with this work of art. First, there are some characteristics that need to be illustrated first. Lord of the Flies is a book about some boys who are deserted on an island . . .

I would moan softly and plunge on. I found that after I read five themes, the first could have been the fourth, or the second, or the third or all of them. The language was interchangeable.

> This book is one of the most interesting books I have ever . . .
> This novel has got to be one of the all time . . .
> Aside from the aforementioned differences. Certain characteristics appear . . .
> The plot concerns itself with . . .

I hadn't seen any other teacher's work that was any better, and besides, this must be the right way. This is what my professors made me do for four years in college.

So I would touch my cardinal red pen to my tongue and continue the attack with witty, telling comments:

> "So what?"
> "I don't see your organization."
> "Fuzzy writing."
> "What are you trying to say?"
> "This is dribble."

I felt I was helping my students to write better by pointing out their weaknesses. The young men usually received lower marks in theme corrections. Their handwriting was often smudgy. I found finger-prints on the titles, black ball-point pen residue on the tops of letters, edges of the papers wrinkled and folded, headings that weren't in the upper right-hand corner of the paper, and whole themes that seemed to be written as if the writer was suffering from Parkinson's Disease.

After the first five I felt myself tiring. I would begin looking at the names on the paper. My objectivity began to die. "Jennifer Fisher," I would sigh, " . . . no spelling errors here." She was a cute blonde youngster. I would smile inwardly, and sure enough there would be no spelling errors, no blotted words, no fingerprints. Neatness was a virtue, a value in itself.

I would then place A/A with a flourish on the top of the paper. This A/A was a marking system devised from some grammar textbook and slowly processed over the years through endless composition committees, and then through our curriculum department. It was a project that may have blown five-hundred teaching hours to perfect. All of it just to find the best way to correct student errors, and to make them better writers. It was sanctified by the Board of Education and published up in a small, smooth paper booklet entitled Dictionary To Correct English.

The pamphlet had a whole intricate system of symbols

worked out that was supposed to correct my students' writing faults. Here are a few of them:

Awk.
Sp.
DP.
Inc.
NS.
NoP.

"SqMod." means "You have used a squinting modifier."

I would circle the error in the sentence, and then place one of these symbols in the margin. I could never remember half the symbols I was supposed to use, and if the student didn't have his symbol-chart in hand, he usually couldn't figure out what he had done wrong. It was tricky business. I enjoyed having the error pointed out in two places on a paper, because that doubled the amount of red ink that covered the paper. It also proved that I was doing my job.

Now I realize that to some my grammar corrections were precarious. But I felt a little less sure about the second mark on content. How do you apply a linear marking scale, ABCDEF, to a plot or character analysis? Is the student's opinion of Huckleberry's moral conscience a B-minus opinion or a C-plus thought? A mathematics problem might be right or wrong, A or F, but I was never quite understood that the analysis of a moral dilemma could not be cut into convenient pieces like slicing a loaf of bread.

When I marked themes I thought I was doing what tradition had dictated as the best way to teach writing. I couldn't

get the nagging feeling out of my mind that something was wrong. Every weekend as I sat at my little desk in the closet, reading into my second set of papers, I would begin to burn, and I kept writing the same comments over and over.

I remember that by the one-hundred-and-twentieth theme on Huckleberry Finn and Lord of the Flies, or whatever I was correcting, I just looked at the name of the student who wrote it. After all, I said to myself, I knew what grade level he worked at anyway, and then I gave him the mark I thought he would get if I had read the paper. I did it for three years. Almost every weekend, and I accepted what I was doing without question.

One night in the latter part of my third year while reading Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, I noticed that Ellison wrote from the subjective voice, and got awfully involved with his subject. I picked up the New York Times Magazine that same evening and found that several stories were written with the writer directly involved in the subject. But I dismissed the idea.

One Sunday morning not too long after this, I was hunched over my little desk correcting papers, when I remembered that business with the Invisible Man. All right, I said to myself, I either bend or break. In front of me on my desk was a line of books I had read over the past year. Maybe they would give me a lead. So I wrote them down on a piece of paper. Here's the list:

Native Son: Richard Wright
Man Child In The Promised Land: Claude Brown
The Great Gatsby: F. Scott Fitzgerald
In Our Time: Ernest Hemingway
Look Homeward Angel: Thomas Wolfe
Long Day's Journey Into Night: Eugene O'Neil

What do they all have in common? Well, they were all written by men except one. No help there. None of them were in expository form. Most of them were confessional. Something there maybe. After thinking a bit, it occurred to me that the author told his story from the position on self-revelation. In each book the focus was on the writer, not necessarily the material he wrote about. If this were so, then mayoe some of the phony student writing that kept plaguing me was not the fault of my students' denseness, but my own. What if I asked a student to write about Zelda as Fitzgerald did about Daisy in The Great Gatsby, or John Knowles did about his childhood chum Phineas in A Separate Peace, or as Hemingway did about his childhood in In Our Time? What if I asked the student to write about his early years the way Charles Dickens wrote about his own poverty-stricken early life in Oliver Twist, or Richard Wright wrote about his in Native Son, or James Baldwin wrote about his in The Fire Next Time?

Maybe, I thought, the neophyte writer should begin with himself, not with outside material. Then I tried to remember if any of my teachers said anything about this. But I couldn't remember if they had. What was I really doing when I assigned

them themes? These are the conclusions I reached:

1. My students wrote badly because they were forced to write on topics of which they had no intimate knowledge.

2. My themes were actually not a method to learn how to write, but tests. They wrote what I wanted, not what they wanted.

3. Having students write on distant subjects far away from their actual experience forced them to use cliches, hackneyed expressions, and jargon.

4. Most of the horrible pain of writing themes comes from not knowing what to say.

In three years of teaching, I had yet to have a student produce one single, solid piece of writing in my classroom. I was twenty-six years old, and I longed to sit and gaze at a whole set of papers, reading each one as if it were a small diamond that I could place in its setting on a long gleaming bracelet of words.

One day in the late spring, I asked my students to do something for me:

> Take out a piece of paper. Put your name on the top. I want you to write as fast as you can for twelve minutes. I don't care about spelling, punctuation, sentence structure. Spell all the words wrong if you like, but don't remove your pen from the paper and don't stop writing.
>
> You can write about anything you like, so long as it is important to you and is the truth as you see it. If your mind is a blank, remember that your mind is never a blank. From the moment you are born to the moment you die, your mind is always producing pictures. Just record the truth and write what is important to you.

They wrote. After class I read the papers. They all

read like themes. I got a phrase or two that might be a seed. I got posing language that began, "I can't think of anything to write. This is the craziest nonsense I have ever done. . . . " I tried again the next day. Still nothing. I asked that they focus on one subject. Five days of twelve-minute writings and the seed stayed buried. The first day of the next week came. I changed my instructions:

> We've been writing for five days. I don't know what I'm looking for, but I do know that if I could just hear your voices, your real ones, not the ones you put in themes, I'm convinced that you could write. I know you are as discouraged as I am. All I am asking is that you try to write the truth and focus in on one subject only and fire it off as fast as you can. You've got twelve minutes. Go.

I waited the twelve minutes, collected the papers, stuffed them into my briefcase, and prayed. Later that night I opened the briefcase and stared at the first tendrils.

> It's 1 a.m., a warm Arkansas morning. I've tried to sleep, but I can't because I have to go to the bathroom. Grabbing a flashlight, I sneak outdoors. Crickets are chirping. What if there's mud daubers crawling all over the floor? They'll sting me to death, if there's no one to guard me. Sure wish Jane was with me, but she's asleep.
>
> Slowly, I open the door and walk in. I turn on the flashlight and put it down next to me. Something's lurking in the dark. A rattlesnake's gonna crawl up the pit and get me if I don't hurry. But I've got to GO. I've got my flashlight with me, so I'll be all right. Maybe if I look around the dark won't look so unfriendly.
>
> A grayish spot is coming towards me from the roof. I slice the light in the corner right above me. It's a spider weaving a web, and her body's swollen with eggs. A single strand dangles three inches above my head. The spider's coming

down that strand, and she's gonna land in my hair. I jump from my seat, knocking the flashlight into the pit. I'll never get out of this shack, if I can't see anything. That bolt is always getting stuck, and it was Jane's flashlight.

I fumble around the door until my fingers touch something metal. Got that rusty bolt back, OK. I push against the door, but it won't open. So I kick it--hard--but it won't budge. Now I'll be really lost. I glance at the lonely light in the pit. It doesn't belong there, and I don't belong here either. I've got to get out.

'Jane! Jane! Come here, QUICK! The door's stuck!' She doesn't hear me. 'Jaaaane! Get me out of here, I'm locked in!' But only the crickets answer.

I turned to the next one.

It was dark. How long had I been asleep? My usual reaction to waking before morning was to go to Mom's room, and I did that then. Her door was closed. It had always been open before.

Since Daddy died there was just us two and our doors were always open. The only reason we didn't sleep together was because I felt important having my own room. I softly spoke her name. There was only a quiet stir from the bed on the other side of the door.

'Mom?'

Feet touched the floor and I heard the bed rise. There was a struggle right next to the--the tall dresser being shoved aside. Then the door opened. I started inside but the door was held. Mom stuck her head around the door, but I couldn't see her body.

'Go back to bed, Honey.'

'I want to come in with you.'

'No, honey, go to your bed. I'll see you in the morning.'

The door closed and I heard a man cough.

And the next . . .

> It was snowing softly, quietly snowing. The cars seemed to pass without making a noise. The only sound was the crunch of our boots in the snow. It was late to be out on a school night especially since I hadn't been home yet, but we couldn't part and ride separate busses home until we had seen the manger.
>
> The park was almost deserted and very still as we walked slowly up to the scene. The light danced on the stony shepherds' faces as they stood over frozen sheep. The woman bent stiffly over her child. As soon as I saw the child's face it all came back alive with a strange glow which spread from a graceful pure face.
>
> Carl broke the silence, 'Our child will look like that.'
>
> There was a hint of a smile across his dark face.
>
> It hit me physically. I looked at him with a sick feeling in my stomach, wondering if he knew exactly what he was saying. He reached for my hand but I kept it in my pocket, 'because it was cold.'
>
> I looked at the baby, the light had faded, the glow had disappeared.

There were three exciting papers in that first stack. I knew that I had made a beginning. I had found a way to release myself and my students from reading and writing the numbing empty forms of writing that had plagued us all in my classrooms.

For the first time, I had found a small flashing bracelet, where content came before outlines, self-expression came before testing, and I hoped that I had helped to remove the pain of not knowing what to write. A seed was growing: the

chance to search, reflect and relate the truth about their own experience and feelings.

Each story was short, intensely personal. None of the students reached for words that didn't fit exactly what they wanted to say. In each the writer began at the last possible moment and ended before the reader expected him to. They wrote in quick, precise sentences. If some long lines were in a row, a short one followed. If a few short lines were in a row, a long one followed.

Powerfully descriptive images like " . . . the light danced on stony shepherds' faces as they stood over frozen sheep . . . " and " . . . it's a spider weaving a web, and her body's swollen with eggs. A single strand dangles three inches above my head. The spider's coming down the strand. . . . " The lines are clear because the writers had them etched in their minds.

By having students forget my schoolish advice, " . . . please use blue ink, so we can learn to write without erasing . . . " and " . . . slant your letters from left to right . . . ," they began to reach within themselves, pulling to the surface of their consciousness a hidden treasure that remained lost beneath the waters of theme language for years.

This is how it works in my classroom today. The students write twelve minutes each day. I collect and scan each paper for thirty seconds, and underline a good word, phrase or line that is memorable. I don't make written comments.

Near the end of the week, I hand out two ditto-masters to each student. He takes one of his writings done the past week, rewrites it, and turns it in. There is no name on it. Each student places his name on a piece of paper and puts it inside the master. I then check off their names as having the writing handed in, and keep the ditto anonymous.

I read over the writings, pull out those that might hurt the student, and ditto up the rest. In a class of thirty, sixteen copies of each writing will do. I distribute the stacks and we go over them. A student may comment on any paper but his own. If he has to justify himself, the self-esteem takes a beating. "Well, what I meant to say was . . . ." We are not interested in what he meant to say, only what is on the paper. If it isn't there, he must try again on the next paper to be more clear.

We do not rewrite work distributed in class. We take the criticism from the last writing and apply it to the next one.

Papers that are pulled from the stacks to prevent injury are reviewed in private conference. After we finish, the student keeps one copy of his writing. At the end of the quarter, he hands in his work with his name attached. Then I try to apply a linear scale.

So from this raw potential:

> Screw the world. It's messing me up. I wish I could talk to someone nice on a better levle. Like telepathy or something.

Tonight we were riding in a car and I saw a star and I wanted to be there so bad that I almost was.

I'll probably meet some creep in college and marry him and become a minister's wife and live forever till I'm 103. I'd rather live a life of sin and die at nine-teen. Either way it wouldn't be much fun cause I'll still have to do it alone.

We got to this:

She was all around us all the time. She kept her desk at the back of the room so that when we had a test you could feel her watching you, a kind of x-ray beam that searched the room for a whisper or a cheater. When she was not sitting there she was moving-always-back and forth in a half circle from my desk to the corner.

She was woman-giant, fleshy arms like hambones at the grocery store and mounds of hips moving somewhere under black dresses. Besides science and spelling, she used to tell us stories about her family, her son who was a football star at the high school, and her husband who worked the assembly line at the playground equipment factory. And she would tell us about her church. A big smile would come over her face as she described it. It was very white with a tall spire and it was not in our town, but out near a farm because of all the rural people who went to it. They couldn't smoke or drink or play cards or even go to the movies because that was evil and against God's will. She'd talk like that and then all of a sudden she'd stop and look at us. Once I asked her what the name of it was. She smiled and shook her head. No, she couldn't tell us. I wanted to know. My father was a minister at the Episcopal Church and it was very different there. People smoked even in the church, and they swore sometimes--my father even did in his sermons. It did not seem wrong there.

I loved Mrs. Roberts. She let me write the play for the Safety Show and I helped her teach songs to the class. At Christmas she gave me a little card and a silver charm bracelet and she always told me when she liked my dresses. I knew she was right when she made Paula Stoppels stay at the board to finish an arithmetic problem, even

though she was crying. And I knew she was right when she stood Keith up in front of the class to confess what she had caught him doing--going to the bathroom outside the school. It was very childish, I agreed. But when she took him into the teachers lounge next door we could hear every thud of his body as she threw him against the wall. I worked very hard then, on my science and did not think about her.

I had told my parents what Mrs. Roberts said in class--about her church and the things God would punish people for. I was a little worried about what would happen to my mother and father, and I told them maybe they should stop smoking and drinking and swearing.

It was in the spring near the end of school. I was brushing my teeth when I heard my mother on the phone. She said Mrs. Roberts' name and I took the phone off the hook and listened.

'She's got Kristy telling us what to do now. She's panicked by our sins and what will happen to us if we're not like Mrs. Roberts.'

'What does Chuck say?'

'He knew about the church through the ministers' council. And he's had several run-ins with their man out there. But he's more than a little upset to be hit through third graders in the public schools. He thinks Mrs. Roberts is out-stepping her role a bit and he's about ready to step on her.'

I hung up the phone very quietly so it would not click. Cigarette smoke came from my father's study. I opened my bedroom window and fell asleep with my head on the sill.

Mrs. Roberts smiled when I told her what I had heard. She nodded and patted my hand. 'Tell your father I'd like to see him. And stop crying. Everything will be all right now.' She pressed me into her folds of black and when she let me go I saw that she was not looking at me but far away and her eyes were like my sisters when we fight. Her mouth, though, was still smiling and I saw for the first time the thin soft black fuzz on her upper lip.

My father took his time leaving the house. At supper he had not come back and my mother fed us spaghettios and sent us upstairs. The clock in their room said nine when I heard him come in. After a while the tea-kettle whistled and I heard their voices from the kitchen.

'She threw every line she could find at me. And I came back the same way. I think she was surprised the Bible had anything in it but commandments.'

'You . . . won?'

'I said she'd damn well better leave the religious training of eight year old kids to their parents. Yeah, I won. I don't know though. She'll still be here after our kids are through school. And when she's gone there'll be somebody else.'

Mrs. Roberts still liked me. I didn't want her to hug me anymore and after a while she didn't. She still let me lead songs with her though. She even gave me the most important part in the class play. But she never mentioned the white church again, and I never knew its name.

The neophyte writer must begin by telling his own deepest emotions, when he has not yet mastered the techniques of writing that it takes years to learn. He must begin at home where he lives, and reflect the world he works, eats, plays and loves in. He must write in his own voice and in his own language using his own vocabulary, tell the truth about himself and what he writes. This, I found, is perhaps where the seed of the teaching of writing is hidden.